

The History of Business and Professional Women

BPW History Began in 1919



While mobilizing for World War I, the U.S. Government recognized the need for a cohesive group to coordinate identification of women's available skills and experience. A Women's War Council, financed through a federal grant, was established by the War Department to organize the resources of professional women. It was guided principally by executives of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was founded on July 16, 1919, at a meeting led by Lena Madeson Phillips of Kentucky. **BPW/USA's First president was Gail Laughlin (picture on left).** BPW/USA became the first organization created to focus on the issues of working women.

Note: Mary Stewart wrote *The Collect* in 1904 as a member of the Fortnightly Club, the forerunner of the Longmont, (Colorado) BPW Club. The Collect was written as a prayer to instill a sense of unity among women working together with wide interests and important goals. Mary Stewart worked for women's suffrage for the State of Colorado and attended the BPW meeting in St. Louis in 1919 at which the Colorado State BPW was launched. She was elected its first corresponding secretary and thereafter took an active part in the growth of the young organization by service as chairman or member of a number of state committees. This author, who until 1910 signed the Collect with her pen name, "Mary Stuart," remained involved in BPW until her death in 1943.

1930s – 1940s



BPW worked throughout the 1930s to prohibit legislation or directives denying jobs to married women and lobbied successfully to legislatively end the legal practice of workplace preference for unmarried persons and, in the case of married persons, preference for males. BPW/USA was one of the first women's organizations to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment in 1937.

At the advent of World War II, BPW developed a classification system for women with specialized skills critical to the war effort and supported the formation of women's branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. While wage discrimination has existed in the U.S. since women and minorities first entered the paid workforce, its prevalence was not felt until the massive influx of women sought work during World War II. Immediately following the war, the Women's Pay Act of 1945 - the first ever legislation to require equal pay - was introduced in the U.S. Congress. It was another 18 years before an equal pay bill made its way to the President's desk to be signed into law.

1950s – 1970s



The national executive office relocated from New York to Washington, as BPW/USA became more active in legislative issues. Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Foundation was incorporated in 1956, creating a branch to provide research, information, career development programs and scholarships to disadvantaged women, as well as workshops and other training opportunities. The Marguerite Rawalt Resource Center opened, becoming a major library and resource on the history of women and women in the workplace.

The establishment of "Status of Women" commissions in the U.S. in 1963 was due largely to BPW/USA efforts. **President Kennedy recognized BPW/USA's leading role in securing passage of the Equal Pay Act by giving BPW/USA's National President the first pen he used when signing the Act into law.**

BPW/USA intensified efforts to eliminate discrimination based on sex and marital status in credit, capital, and insurance practices. A legislative strategy was developed to achieve the Congressional votes needed and the BPW Political Action Committee (BPW/PAC) was formed in 1979 to endorse federal candidates.

1980s



BPW/USA tackled "comparable worth" by calling for newspapers to stop the occupational segregation in classified ads (clustering of women in a few restricted occupations of low-paying, dead-end jobs). Numerous state and municipal governments revamped their pay scales, recognizing dissimilar jobs may not be identical, but may be comprised of tasks, educational requirements, experience and other characteristics that are equivalent or comparable. In 1986, San Francisco became the first in the nation to approve a pay equity referendum, implementing \$34 million in increases for employees in female and minority-dominated jobs. At the Hartford, Connecticut Convention in 1985, BPW/USA's Legislative Platform expanded to include the Equal Rights Amendment Preamble. **Also at this Convention, BPW/USA initiated the \$2.65 million campaign to renovate the national headquarters at 2012 Massachusetts Avenue ("Project 2012").**

1988



The Red Purse Society was created to focus on the issue of Pay Equity. The Red Purse Campaign was initiated by BPW/USA in 1988 to spotlight wage disparity and raise funds for the campaign. Over the years, BPW has spearheaded various events to address the issue of the wage gap. The Red Purse Society enabled members and non-members to promote and support Equal Pay events, including but not limited to lobbying efforts, state forums, and PAC committee speaking engagements.

1990 – 1993

Workplace equity issues including sexual harassment, the glass ceiling, health care reform, dependent care, tort reform, increasing the minimum wage, lifetime economic security and pay equity continued to be BPW/USA's targeted issues. Then-Secretary of Labor, Elizabeth Dole, and First Lady Barbara Bush addressed BPW/USA's members at the White House Briefing during the 1990 "Lobby Day" event. **At the Minneapolis, Minnesota 1992 Convention, BPW/PAC announced the first-ever endorsement of a presidential ticket by endorsing Clinton-Gore.**

BPW/USA's grassroots membership worked as never before in GOTV (Get Out The Vote!) campaigns. From voter education forums, working in candidate campaigns, fundraising for candidates and registering women to vote, 1992 proved to be the "Year of the Woman," electing a record 4 women to the U.S. Senate and an unprecedented 24 women to the House. This political activism continued to the 1996 elections where BPW/USA joined other women's groups endorsing the Women's Vote Project. Continuing with a focus on workplace issues, BPW/USA lobbied Congress for passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act. After nearly a decade, the FMLA passes in 1993. Discussions on "comparable worth" are expanded to include enforcement and strengthening of existing Equal Pay legislation. The Pay Equity Employment Act of 1994, followed by the Equal Pay Act (introduced in 1994) and the Paycheck Fairness Act (introduced in 1997) became BPW/USA's focus legislation through the '90s.



1994 – 1999



Business and Professional Women/USA's (BPW/USA) members lobbied their Members of Congress successfully convincing them to pass the groundbreaking Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which included millions of dollars in state grants to combat violence against women. The programs created by VAWA have also been successful at providing victims with emergency shelter, hotlines, and supportive services. VAWA also created, for the first time, a civil rights remedy for gender-motivated crimes. **BPW/USA celebrated its 75th anniversary at the 1994 St. Louis, Missouri Convention with Gloria Steinem as the keynote speaker.** Also in October 1994, the

syndicated cartoon, "Cathy," celebrated National Business Women's Week, one of BPW/USA's Signature Events.

BPW/USA battles attacks on affirmation action throughout the nation: 1996 in California, 1998 in Washington, and 1999 in Florida. Social Security Reform became a front-burner issue for BPW/USA in 1999 and continues to be an issue BPW/USA follows closely. The wage gap contributes to a \$200,000 loss in social security benefits to the average woman.

2000 – 2005

BPW/USA expanded its '90s “Making Workplaces Work” initiative to the “Working Family Values” Program, and more recently, the theme of “Workplace Equity & Work- life Effectiveness,” with education and awareness focusing on pay equity, dependent care, workplace flexibility, and social security reform. BPW/USA initiated “The Women & Social Security Summit” in February 2001.



BPW/USA continues to be branded as the premiere grassroots organization addressing the wage gap, with most of our Local Organizations participating in events to focus on Equal Pay Day, usually the 2nd Tuesday of April. In 2002, the “Take the Pay Equity Pledge” Campaign asked candidates for Congress to sign a pledge to support the Paycheck Fairness Act.

The 75th Anniversary of National Business Women’s Week® (NBWW) was recognized in 2003. To celebrate of the vital role of women in business, leaders of Business and Professional Women/USA (BPW/USA®) and BPW Foundation rang the closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) on Tuesday, October 21, 2003. The ringing of the bell at the NYSE launched a six month focus on women’s issues that saluted the 75th Anniversary of National Business Women’s Week® and acknowledged the accomplishments of working women.

BPW/USA successfully urged the Bureau of Labor Statistics to continue collecting data on women workers after they announced they would cease collecting it after July 2005. [VAWA \(Violence Against Women Act\)](#) was set to expire in September 2005 and BPW/USA made the VAWA reauthorization a top legislative priority. VAWA 2005 focused on expanding several of the key provisions. In October 2005, BPW/USA launched Women Joining Forces: Closing Ranks, Opening Doors (WJF). This commitment made BPW/USA the first and only non-governmental agency to offer programming that supports women veterans.

2006 - 2009

In 2006 BPW Foundation celebrated its 50th Anniversary throughout the year with Lighting the Way: Exploring Our Past, Discovering Our Future. February 27th was declared BPW Foundation Day by Washington, DC Mayor Anthony Williams. Through its strong grassroots efforts, 2006 BPW/USA members were instrumental in getting Johanna’s Law signed into law. This law authorizes a national gynecologic cancer early detection and awareness campaign targeted for women and their healthcare providers.

In 2007 the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate held hearings on Equal Pay, where BPW/USA and BPW Foundation submitted joint testimony. The hearings discussed how and why legislation such as the Paycheck Fairness Act is needed to address remaining systemic barriers to women being paid fairly. BPW Foundation published ground-breaking research providing a unique snap shot of women veterans as they return to the civilian workplace.

BPW/USA attends Equal Pay Day press conference, also attended by Senators Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Representatives Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and George Miller (D-CA). BPW/USA expressed its disappointment that the Senate was unable to bring the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (HR 2831) to a vote. BPW Foundation released Successful Workplaces Digest, an innovative how-to guide for employers to improve workplaces. On November 14, BPW/USA and BPW Foundation co-sponsored a congressional briefing about the challenges facing women veterans.



Business and Professional Women/USA (BPW/USA) merged with Business and Professional Women’s (BPW) Foundation effective July 1, 2009. BPW/USA members approved a friendly merger with its sister organization.